THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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FOR RELEASE ON RECEIPT:
THE AFRO-AMERICAN TRADITION
IN DECORATIVE ARTS

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The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts, an exhibition organized by The Cleveland Museum of Art in cooperation with the Cleveland chapter of The Links, Inc., a national organization of black women promoting civic, cultural, and educational activities, opens at the Museum on February 1 and will run through April 2 before traveling to six other U.S. cities.

The exhibition examines the meeting of black African and white European cultures as seen in the art of Afro-American craftsmen using traditional African techniques and motifs to meet the utilitarian needs of a white Euro-American society. African elements and traditions are identified and traced in decorative arts pieces produced by black Americans over a 350 year period. Nine decorative arts categories--basketry, musical instruments, wood carving, quilting, pottery, boat building, blacksmithing, architecture, and graveyard decoration--are scrutinized for their African heritage.

The people who became Afro-Americans were drawn from almost all of Africa. The works chosen for The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts represent this varied geographic and cultural sourcing. At the same time they show the breadth of the dispersion of black African traditions in America.

Rice cultivation and the making of baskets to winnow the rice were among the many useful skills which Africans brought to America. In the costal region of South Carolina these skills proved particularly useful and baskets made after

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an African design were soon in heavy use.

Drums and stringed instruments using a gourd for a body on which a wooden neck was fastened were in common use in Africa. Drums were so important in African music that many slave owners in America forbade their making or use. One object in the exhibition shows how African drum making may have survived in America. It is a rice mortar that is the same shape as a hollow log drum and which may have been used as a drum by stretching an animal skin across its opening.

Afro-American wood carvers used their creative skills much as their ancestors did. A variety of different forms were carved, usually cut from a single block of wood. Walking sticks are the most common examples of the black carver's art to survive. Most have reptile motifs, while some combine a human form.

Slave women arrived in America with skills in working with fabric. The purpose to which they had put those skills and that fabric in Africa was vastly different from the making of a quilt, an unknown and unneeded object in Africa. But in this country quilts were needed, and the slave masters set the women to work producing basically Euro-American-style quilts. Many quilts, however, made by Afro-Americans for their own needs, did not look like European or American quilts: they resembled the fabric work that had been done in Africa.

In Africa pottery was a woman's craft, but in America it became an occupation of black men. Most were single individuals owned and trained by whites who owned pottery shops. The effigy, or monkey, jug with its bold shape and lines, its arching eyebrows and bulging eyes, closely resembles designs in African masks and became a widespread form throughout the South. The pots of a slave named Dave, usually large open mouth storage jars with slab handles, are inscribed with poetry as a sign of Dave's education and verbal skills.

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At first in the West Indies and then on the North American continent blacks continued the centuries old tradition of small boat building. The multiple log dugout canoe became a popular design; one from which the "batoe," although built from planks, may have evolved.

Ornamental wrought iron was produced in great quantities throughout the 18th and 19th centuries in Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, and New Orleans. Many of the decorative balconies, windows, grills, and gates were made by slaves or free blacks employed by white owned iron firms.

Today Philip Simmons and his two journeymen make iron work that is a blend of cultural influences, carrying on the earlier black tradition of innovation and invention in iron work. His forms repeat the Anglo-German motifs which are the mainstay of the Charleston tradition of ornamental iron work, but they also incorporate such departures from that tradition as snakes, spear-shaped pickets, and fish.

West African architecture survives in the "shotgun" houses seen throughout the South. So named because you, "could fire a shotgun in the front door and have the charge go out the back door without touching anything," the houses are long and narrow, usually one room wide with the doors centered on the ends.

The West and Central African practice of decorating graves with ceramic ornaments, baskets, iron pots, cloth, etc. continued in Afro-American cemeteries. The usual white American cemetery is made up of neat rows of stones and markers laid out in symmetrical patterns, but Afro-American graves in rural areas did not conform to this norm. Instead they were covered with objects in the tradition of African grave decoration. Most graves in rural Afro-American cemeteries have been destroyed, however, and only photographs remain.

The exhibition is a study of the survival in America of African traditions and techniques. Black people taken from their homeland, forced to leave behind all

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familiar material possessions, were in addition forbidden to make objects that would carry the culture of their previous existence into the plantations and slave pens of the New World. African motifs and techniques did however survive the cultural suppression of slavery to reappear in the objects black slaves made for every day use. This blending of African with European/American traditions has given the Afro-American artist a double heritage, a distant past reaching back to Africa and a more immediate past drawing on a people's response to the new environment of America.

John Michael Vlach, assistant professor in the department of anthropology at the University of Texas, is guest curator of the exhibition. Dr. Vlach, a noted scholar of Afro-American folklore and architecture, organized the exhibition and wrote the catalog.

Links was founded in 1946 for the purpose of promoting civic, cultural, and educational activities. The Cleveland Chapter was established in 1950 and numbers twenty-seven members. Chapters of the organization in other cities will be working with the institutions hosting the exhibition in Birmingham, Boston, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.

The exhibition is assisted by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Serving as project director for the Museum is associate curator James A. Birch.

With the aid of a grant from the Gund Foundation, Links will present four public lectures at the Museum. On Wednesday, February 8, at 8:30 p.m., Edmund Barry Gaither, director/curator of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, will speak on "African Cultural Transfers to the Americas." On Sunday, February 12, at 3:30 p.m., David Driskell, artist and professor of art at the University of Maryland, will lecture on "Skills and Services: The Afro-American Artisan." On Wednesday, March 1, at 8:30 p.m., Richard Long, professor of English and director of the Center

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for African and Afro-American Studies at Atlanta University, will speak on "Word as Craft in Afro-American Tradition." Roslyn Adele Walker-Oni, director of The University Museums/curator of the Ethnographic Collection of Illinois State University, will speak on "Some Further Considerations on the Origin of Afro-American Grotesque Jugs and Walking Canes" on Sunday, March 19, at 3:30 p.m.

Also planned for the exhibition by the Museum's Department of Art History and Education is a lecture at the Member's Preview, Tuesday, January 31 at 6:30 p.m. by Dr. Vlach on "The Hidden Meaning: A Look at Afro-American Architecture." On Sunday, February 19 at 3:30 p.m. Dr. Gladys-Marie Fry of the University of Maryland will speak on "The Influence of Africa on Afro-American Quilting Style." On Sunday, March 5, at 3:30 p.m. Robert Farris Thompson, professor of art at Yale University, will speak on "The Afro-Americanization of Subsaharan Art."

Beginning on Wednesday, February 1, when the show opens to the public, John Moore, of the Department of Art History and Education, who is serving as supervisor of education programs for the exhibition, will give daily gallery talks (1:30 p.m.) through Tuesday, February 7. Slide tapes will also be available for viewing in the Audio-Visual Center.

An informal booklet about the exhibition and listing all of the objects will be available free at the exhibition, thanks to a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

A 176-page catalog with 8 color illustrations and 200 black and white photographs is for sale at the exhibition for $5. Nationally the catalog is available through The Kent State University Press for $12. The Museum will not sell the catalog by mail.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact David Patterson or Ann Edwards, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.